

# Authorities criticized for lack of warning about wildfire

By Associated Press

High school math teacher Bill Davis watched from his home as smoke mounted from one of the most destructive fires in California in recent memory.

From a previous fire in late July, he knew to expect a recorded call on his cellphone or look for someone coming through the neighborhood with a bullhorn yelling for people to evacuate.

“None of that happened,” he said. His house in Lake County burned after he finally rounded up his cats and left.

Davis was among a number of survivors who say they never got an official evacuation notice Saturday about the blaze – a situation that raises questions about whether more could have been done to notify residents.

Authorities defended their warnings and rescue attempts, saying they did all they could to reach people in the remote area of homes, many prized for their privacy.

“You may get that notice, or you may not, depending on how fast that fire is moving. If you can see the fire, you need to be going,” said Lynnette Round, a spokeswoman for CalFire.

Round said two men in Calaveras County – 66-year-old Mark McCloud and 82-year-old Owen Goldsmith – died after rejecting orders to evacuate.

Three people were killed in a separate fire in Lake County. It wasn't clear if they received evacuation notices. However, two

of them declined requests by friends and family to leave.

The body of 72-year-old Barbara McWilliams, who used a walker, was found in her home in Anderson Springs. Her caregiver, Jennifer Hittson, said there were no evacuation orders when she left McWilliams' home around 3 p.m. Saturday and no indication the fire was that serious.

She asked McWilliams if she wanted to leave but the retired teacher declined, saying the fire didn't seem bad.

Elsewhere in Anderson Springs, the body of former newspaper reporter Leonard Neft, 69, was found near his burnt car after what may have been an attempt to escape, his daughter Joslyn Neft said Friday. His wife had asked him to leave earlier Saturday, but he said the fire looked far away.

Elsewhere in Lake County, the body of Bruce Beven Burns, 65, was found in a building on the grounds of his brother's recycling business, where Burns also lived. It's unknown why he stayed.

Davis said he waited for an evacuation notice until the electricity failed. At that point, he called CalFire for information and waited on hold for an hour.

"When I finally got through ... they said my street was not on an evacuation order, but you might want to leave. I was never told, 'Get the hell out of there, there's a huge fire coming at you,'" he said.

The Lake County sheriff's office has declined to respond to repeated phone calls and emails seeking comment on how and when residents were notified. In a statement issued earlier this week, sheriff's Lt. Steve Brooks said CalFire requested evacuation assistance at 1:50 p.m. Saturday but it remains unclear which communities were notified and how.

CalFire spokesman Richard Cordova could not confirm early

evacuation details but said that given the speed of the fire, the death toll could have been much higher.

“Any loss of a life is heartfelt, but there should have been a lot more lives lost with the way that fire was moving,” he said.

The Lake County fire tore through 62 square miles in 12 hours, burning nearly 600 homes and causing thousands of residents to flee. Lucas Spelman, fire captain for CalFire, said 15,400 people were under evacuation.

Lake County Supervisor Jim Comstock, 65, who lives in Middletown, said he didn’t receive an evacuation order and he believes authorities didn’t have time to issue orders in person, given the fire’s speed.

Comstock stayed on his 1,700-acre ranch with his wife, daughter and grandchildren, battling the flames. The fire scorched all but 50 acres of his land and spared his house and barn.

“I’m old, and I’m ornery,” he said of the reason he stayed.

Gary Herrin defended his 3 acres in Middletown. No one told him to leave, he said, and he wouldn’t have anyway.

When the fire hit his street around 5:30 p.m. Saturday, Herrin said, he and several others used water from wells and swimming pools to battle flames, saving eight homes.

At 10 p.m. he collapsed by a swimming pool with about 6 inches of water left. “We were going to stand our ground, and we decided to fight,” he said.

The story brought a shudder from James McMullen, a former California state fire marshal who runs a fire consulting business in Davis.

“Some people don’t realize how intense a wildfire is and they

say, 'Oh, I'll just stay here with my garden hose and leap up on the roof, and yet that's the worst thing they can do,'" he said.